

For their February talk, the Appleby Archaeology Group were pleased to welcome back Mark Graham, from Grampus Heritage and Training. Mark is the Project Director of Discovering Derventio, a Heritage Lottery funded community archaeology project at Papcastle, near Cockermouth.

Mark began by giving the group a brief outline of the beginnings of the project, which originated in the discovery of Roman pottery washed out of the banks of the River Derwent during the extreme floods of 2009. With the permission of the HLF, a sum of money was allocated from another project to allow an investigation to take place on Broomlands, just outside Cockermouth. As a result of the highly encouraging geophysics results and subsequent excavations, Grampus successfully applied for HLF funding for a 3 year project under the Discovering Derventio banner. The project is now in its second full year and will continue until the end of 2015.

Having explained the earlier phases of the project to the group in 2011, Mark described the results of the geophysical surveys and excavations since that date. The 2011 surveys of the northern bank of the Derwent at Sibby Brow had revealed outlines of several buildings, one of which was thought to be a bath-house. An evaluation excavation had revealed a large courtyard building which dated to the 1st century & which had been carefully disassembled in the 2nd century. A large scale excavation had followed in 2012 and the bath-house theory was quickly confirmed - a room with a hypocaust soon appeared, followed by the curving line of what was originally thought to be a cold pool.

As the hypocaust was excavated further, a skeleton was discovered under the floor level – was this a Roman murder mystery? Later analysis could only date the bones somewhere between the 1st and 4th century, the latter date being some while after the building was out of Roman use. Whenever this death took place, it looked as though it was unlikely to have been an accident.

The cold pool turned out to have a hypocaust as well, so was probably a laconium, or sauna. There was a changing room with a flagged floor on which later burning had taken place, whilst further excavation revealed the stoke hole for the fire in which bones of several goats were found. Meanwhile, in the first hypocaust another exciting discovery was made which was identified as an iron candelabrum around 5 feet long. This would probably have been one of many used around the bath-house to provide lighting. It is a similar to others found in Pompeii and is a unique find in Roman Britain. Currently, this find is stabilised awaiting possible conservation.

After seven exciting weeks, the site (approximately 50m by 50m) had yielded a human skeleton, a pre-Hadrianic mansio, with bath-house and oven, evidence of a late building or compound, and a second bath-house with three rooms and tile hypocaust, but no latrines! This, together with the Broomlands site across the river, conjures an image of a busy Papcastle with army and civilian populations and visitors and many everyday services on site. What could be more enjoyable than using the elegant and decorated bathhouse, with its candelabra and the views of the Lakeland Fells?

Mark then went on to talk about the survey, evaluation and excavation of the Eastern Vicus of the fort, which took place in late 2012 and throughout 2013. One of the first constructions to be discovered was a very well preserved section of the Roman road north towards Carlisle. Finding it was fortunate, because some of it lies under the back gardens of a housing estate.

As the excavation progressed, building foundations had started to appear. The buildings fronted straight onto the road so were probably shops or other businesses – possibly small industrial ventures since some had attached courtyards and there was some evidence of burning. A small cobbled lane with a good drain was found at right angles to the road. Some large stones within the foundations appeared to be post pads for supporting timbers, so these would have been wattle & daub buildings. Finds in 2013 were not quite so exciting as in 2012, although a good piece of a mortarium was found, some Samian ware, a slate roof tile and a tiny pottery statue of Venus, which would have been a devotional object – a common find in Roman excavations.

Summing up, Mark said that the excavation had achieved all that he had hoped in providing a snapshot of everyday life in Roman Papcastle. The project now had a complete plan of a Roman strip-house to add to our bathhouses, mansio, mill, ‘barracks’ and forge.

Finally, Mark described the future plans for the project. These will probably include a further investigation of the field near the A66/A595 roundabout west of Cockermouth, surveyed in 2010. The original geophysics results indicated that there had probably been a long timber built structure with an elevated floor on the site. If Roman, this might well have been a granary and if so, what was it doing around 800m away from the fort? Speculation rages – was it because there was some kind of landing stage close by on the Derwent and therefore barge transportation from the sea? The long earthwork with an easy gradient leading up to the fort, known locally as Friar’s Walk, is a tempting haulage way for loaded carts!

Mark ended his talk by inviting participation in Discovering Derventio from any Appleby Archaeology members or indeed anyone else who would be interested in becoming part of this fascinating project.

Mark was thanked for his absorbing talk and heartily applauded by the group.

The penultimate talk in the season will be on March 11th at the Appleby Market Hall, when Blaise Vyner will be examining the parallels between the archaeology of the high ground of Cumbria and Fylingdales Moor in North Yorkshire.

Resources: <http://www.discoverderventio.co.uk/>